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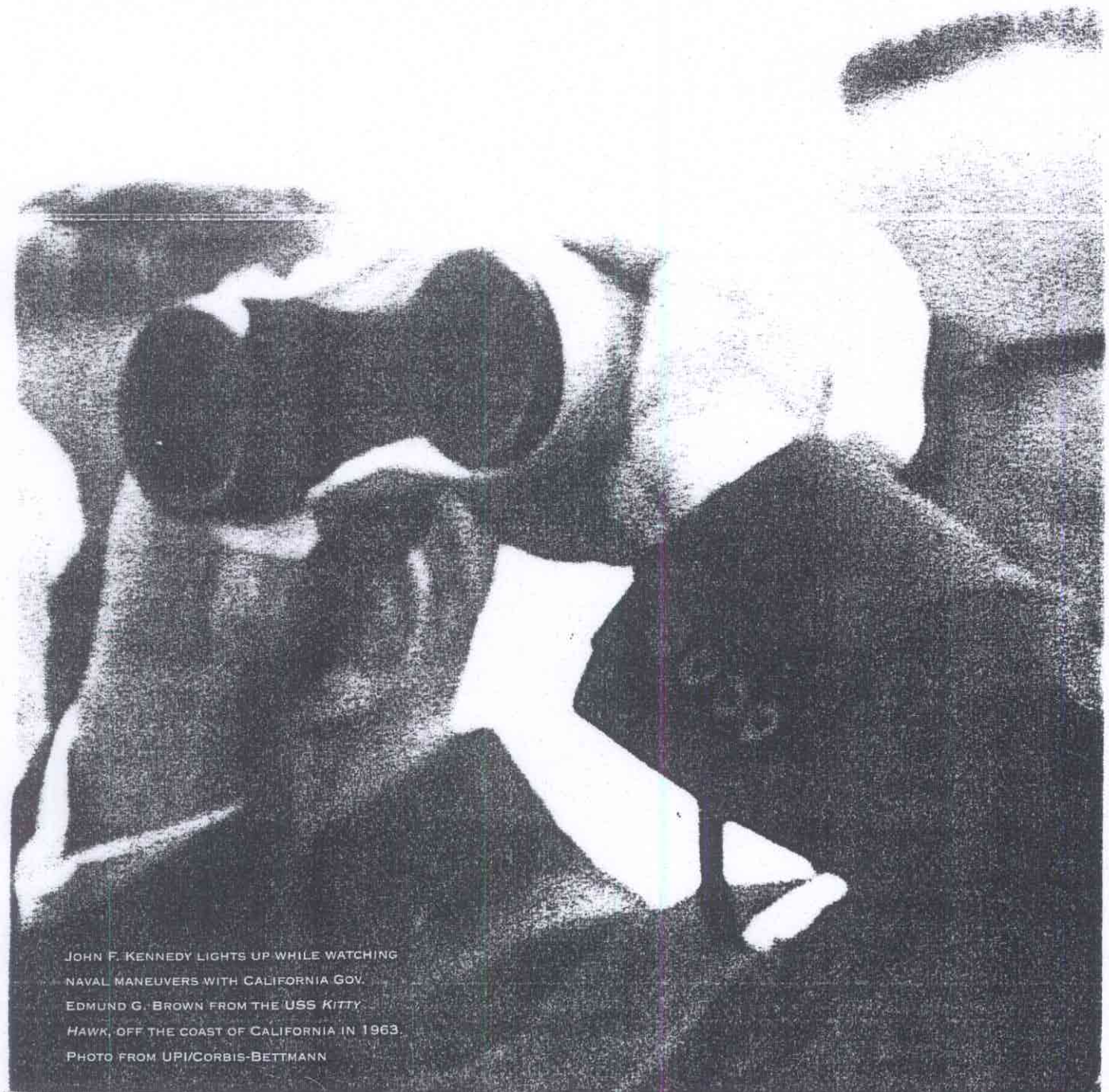


JFK

The Truth As I See It
by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

JFK REVISITED

A NOTED HISTORIAN AND KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION INSIDER REFUTES
THE REVISIONIST VERSION OF JFK'S LEGACY BY ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.



JOHN F. KENNEDY LIGHTS UP WHILE WATCHING
NAVAL MANEUVERS WITH CALIFORNIA GOV.
EDMUND G. BROWN FROM THE USS KITTY
HAWK, OFF THE COAST OF CALIFORNIA IN 1963.
PHOTO FROM UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN

Thirty-five years after his death, John Fitzgerald Kennedy remains a vivid presence in the minds of his countrymen. In a way, it is odd that this should be so. Nearly half the American people arrived on this earth after his death; at least three-fifths are too young to remember him in the White House. His presidency was one of the shortest in American history.

Yet Kennedy lives vigorously in memory. Television is a help. JFK's face and wit and eloquence are familiar even to schoolchildren. The dynastic effect is a help, too. The impact on American politics of his brother Robert in the 1960s and of his brother Edward in more recent times prolongs the Kennedy mystique. And, of course—and alas—the assassination also helps. Even JFK's detractors cannot deny the awful

drama of a slain hero, a gallant career cut off in midstream, a life unfulfilled.

Memory soon becomes entwined with myth. Kennedy devotees cherish the idea of Camelot and its brief shining moments. Myth-making aside, many Americans remember Kennedy as the strong and purposeful president who saved the peace in the most dangerous moment of the Cold War, assumed leadership in the battle for racial justice, initiated the exploration of space, tapped the republic's latent idealism and inspired a generation with a passion for public service.

Still, as Emerson said, "Every hero becomes a bore at last." Myth breeds countermyth. Revisionist critics see Kennedy as charming but superficial, a triumph of style over substance, a politician more concerned with image than results, who talked big but accomplished

little. In the darker side of the countermyth, Kennedy becomes a faithless husband and incorrigible philanderer, a reckless risk-taker in both private and public life, a bellicose president who ordered the assassination of foreign leaders, plunged the nation into the Vietnam morass, almost provoked a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and, between needless international crises, turned the White House into a bordello.

Myth versus countermyth? Public opinion polls show continuing popular admiration for Kennedy. In June 1997, John Zogby, the pollster who came the closest to forecasting the outcome of the 1996 election, asked a broad sample of Americans to rate twentieth-century presidents. JFK came in second, behind Franklin D. Roosevelt, but ahead of Truman, Reagan and Eisenhower.

Among historians, however, Kennedy's reputation has fluctuated madly since his death. When *American Heritage* magazine invited scholars in 1988 to name the single most overrated figure in American history, JFK got more votes than anyone else (Ronald Reagan came in second). One respondent summed up the revisionist case against Kennedy: "His public relations approach to the presidency was an almost total disaster for the nation....The revelations of his private life have added more tarnish to the once golden image."

More recently, there seems to have been a mild Kennedy revival. In 1996, continuing a practice begun by my father in 1948, I asked a select group of historians and political scientists to rate the American presidents. Kennedy came in 12th out of 41, following Eisenhower and John Adams and followed by Cleveland and Lyndon Johnson. He received nine votes in the "near great" category, 21 as "high average" and only one as "below average."

A much larger 1997 poll, conducted by William J. Ridings Jr. and Stuart B. McIver, surveyed 719 scholars. In that poll Kennedy came in 15th, following Monroe and John Adams, and followed by Cleveland and McKinley (Eisenhower was ninth, Lyndon Johnson, 12th). Ridings and McIver asked their group to make ratings in designated categories. Kennedy placed seventh in appointments, eighth in leadership qualities, 10th in political skill, 16th in accomplishments and crisis management,



JFK AND JACQUELINE KENNEDY GREET WELL-WISHERS UPON ARRIVAL IN DALLAS ON NOVEMBER 22, 1963, ABOVE. (ART RICKERBY/TIME WARNER INC.) OPPOSITE PAGE, KENNEDY GREETING A THROG OF SUPPORTERS AND JOURNALISTS BEFORE THE 1960 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION IN LOS ANGELES. (AP)





TOP TO BOTTOM: JFK WITH FBI DIRECTOR J. EDGAR HOOVER AT THE WHITE HOUSE IN FEBRUARY 1961 (HENRY BURROUGHS/AP PHOTO), WITH FRANK SINATRA AT THE INAUGURAL BALL IN JANUARY 1961 (AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS), AND WITH RICHARD NIXON PRIOR TO THEIR FIRST TV DEBATE IN 1960 (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN).

and 34th in character and integrity (recent presidents did not do well in this category—LBJ was 37th, Reagan 39th; perhaps earlier presidents benefit as character flaws fade in memory).

So the Kennedy argument goes on. The mystery remains. What kind of a president was Kennedy? Was he an idealist or a cynic? Was he an achiever or only a talker? Did he really like people or did he exploit and discard them? Was he reckless or was he circumspect? Was Camelot a reality or an illusion?

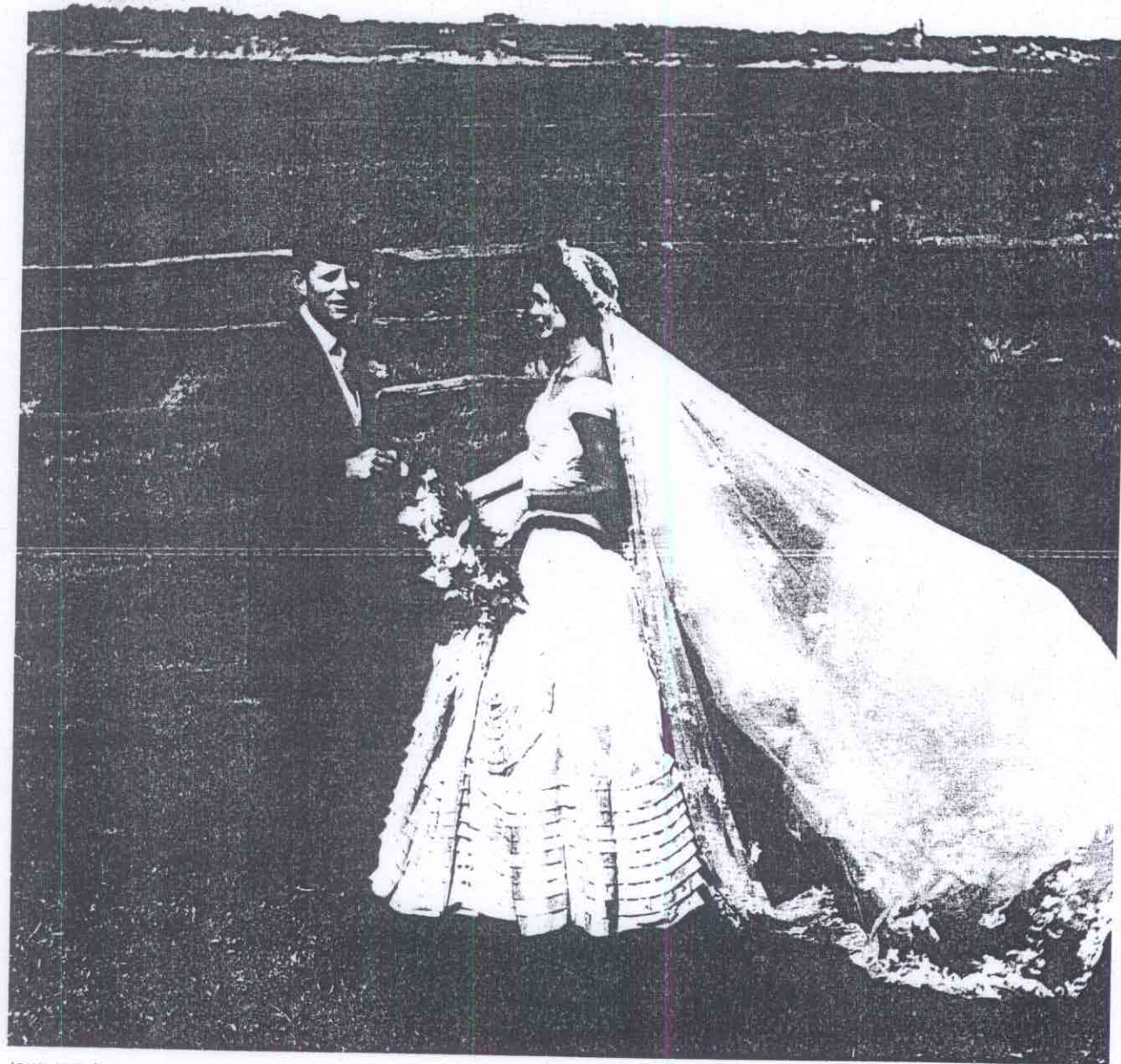
In considering such questions, I make no great claim to impartiality. I served in JFK's White House, and it was the most exhilarating experience of my life. Yet close observation of a president need not be a disqualification in writing about him. I did, after all, know Kennedy, and I knew him for many years. When he was president, I saw him in the daytime as a special assistant and in evenings as a friend. I saw him in good times and in bad. I may not be totally useless as a witness.

Let us first dispose of Camelot. JFK had gone to prep school and college with Alan Jay Lerner, and he liked the songs Lerner and Fredrick Loewe wrote for the popular 1960 musical. But no one when JFK was alive ever spoke of Washington as Camelot—and if anyone had done so, no one would have been more derisive than JFK. Nor did those of us around him see ourselves for a moment, heaven help us, as knights of the Round Table. Camelot was Jacqueline Kennedy's grieving thought a week after her husband was killed. Later she told John Kenneth Galbraith that she feared the idea had been overdone. For that matter, King Arthur's Camelot was hardly noted for marital constancy, and the Arthurian saga concluded in betrayal and death.

Then a word about the 1960 election. A current myth is that the Kennedys stole the election in Illinois and that Richard Nixon's finest hour was his patriotic refusal to shake the republic to its foundations by contesting the result. In fact, Illinois was not crucial to Kennedy's victory. Had he lost Illinois, Kennedy still would have won by 276 to 246 in the electoral college. And, if Mayor Richard Daley's men stole votes in Cook County, Republicans stole votes downstate. The state electoral board, 4-1 Republican, voted unanimously to certify the Kennedy electors.

TOP TO BOTTOM: SENATORS BARRY GOLDWATER AND JFK IN WASHINGTON, D.C., IN 1958 (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN), JFK ADDRESSES THE NATION DURING THE 1962 CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS (ARCHIVE PHOTOS), LYNDON JOHNSON WITH JFK AT THE 1960 DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN).





JOHN AND JACQUELINE KENNEDY ON THEIR WEDDING DAY IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1953. PHOTO FROM THE MOLLY THAYER COLLECTION/MAGNUM PHOTOS INC.

An associated myth is that Joseph P. Kennedy made a deal in the winter of 1959-1960 with a Chicago gangster named Sam Giancana to use the Mafia and trade unions under Mafia control to turn out the Chicago vote for his son. The elder Kennedy, the story goes, was well acquainted with Mafiosi because he had been a bootlegger himself in Prohibition days 30 years before.

It is true that Kennedy was a whiskey importer in the 1930s, but that was after

repeal and entirely legal. During Prohibition, he had worked first as a broker for Hayden Stone and thereafter as a Wall Street speculator on his own. In the mid-1920s, he bought into a chain of movie theaters and soon went into film production. When would he have had time to be a bootlegger? Why would he have run the risk when he could make money easily and legally in Wall Street and Hollywood?

The Founding Father, Richard Whalen's

careful and critical 1964 biography, makes no such allegations, beyond noting that Joseph Kennedy produced Scotch for his classmates at their 10th Harvard reunion in 1922—hardly a damning incident. Professor Mark Haller of Temple University recently took the trouble of searching the comprehensive list of bootleggers in the intelligence files of the U.S. Coast Guard and found no mention of Joseph Kennedy. When Kennedy was up for Senate confirmation, first as a chairman of



KENNEDY'S MOTORCADE IS DOGGED BY A ZEALOUS NIXON SUPPORTER WHILE ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL IN LOS ANGELES IN 1960. PHOTO FROM AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

the Securities and Exchange Commission, then as chairman of the Maritime Commission, then as ambassador to the Court of St. James, no one suggested that he was an ex-bootlegger. Had he been one, he would not have been appointed or confirmed. Yet the bootlegger myth has become a staple of contemporary television shows and supermarket tabloids.

There are other curiosities about the tale. It is curious that the elder Kennedy should have asked the mob to work for his son months before John Kennedy had even won the nomination. It is still more curious that the father should have done so when the only big union influenced by the mob was the Teamsters Union—and the Teamsters, led by Robert Kennedy's mortal enemy, Jimmy Hoffa, were for Nixon. And it is most curious

of all that a shrewd and experienced man like Joseph P. Kennedy should have regarded Sam Giancana and not Mayor Daley, the last of the great political bosses, as the key to politics in Chicago.

Giancana was hardly unknown to the Kennedy family. As counsel for the Senate Rackets Committee in 1958, Robert Kennedy had succinctly described Giancana as "chief gunman for the group that succeeded the Capone mob." Called before the committee, Giancana declined to answer questions on the grounds that his answers might tend to incriminate him—and giggled as he declined. Robert Kennedy said bitingly, "I thought only little girls giggled, Mr. Giancana." At the very time the elder Kennedy was supposedly recruiting Giancana for John Kennedy's campaign, Robert Kennedy, in his book *The*

Enemy Within, published in February 1960, was portraying his father's supposed ally in the most scorching and contemptuous way.

Fifteen months after Giancana giggled before the Rackets Committee, the Central Intelligence Agency in its wisdom signed him up in a plot to murder Fidel Castro. The Mafia had flourished in Havana under the indulgent dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, but Castro, when he came to power in 1959, closed its gambling casinos and whorehouses and drove the mobsters from Cuba. This gave the Mafia, as the CIA necromancers saw it, the motives and the contacts to do the dirty deed without implicating the United States government.

Recruiting the Mafia was a decision made by the Eisenhower administration, not, as it is often said, by the Kennedy administration. In September 1960, a CIA operative met

with mobsters to work out the details. In October, the CIA installed Giancana and another mobster, John Rosselli, in the Kenilworth Hotel in Miami, offering \$150,000 for Castro's assassination. All this took place months before Kennedy was inaugurated.

There is no evidence that the gangsters did much to earn their pay. Giancana bragged to a friend that they were "conning the hell out of the CIA." But working for the CIA, he no doubt believed, would insure him against federal prosecution. Up to a point he was right. While he was plotting away in Miami, he feared that his girl, singer Phyllis McGuire, might be carrying on with comedian Dan Rowan in faraway Las Vegas. He asked the CIA to put an illegal wiretap in Rowan's room. The CIA obliged; the wiretap was discovered; the CIA, claiming that the case involved national security, brought intense pressure on the Department of Justice to stop prosecution.

There is more to the Giancana story. In the course of the 1960 campaign, Frank Sinatra, a

pal of Giancana's, introduced John Kennedy to an attractive young woman named Judith Campbell. Though her later claims were contradictory and her story escalates with each telling, it seems that their affair extended into his presidency. She also had an affair with Giancana. How much did she tell Giancana about Kennedy? Did the Mafia have the power to blackmail the president?

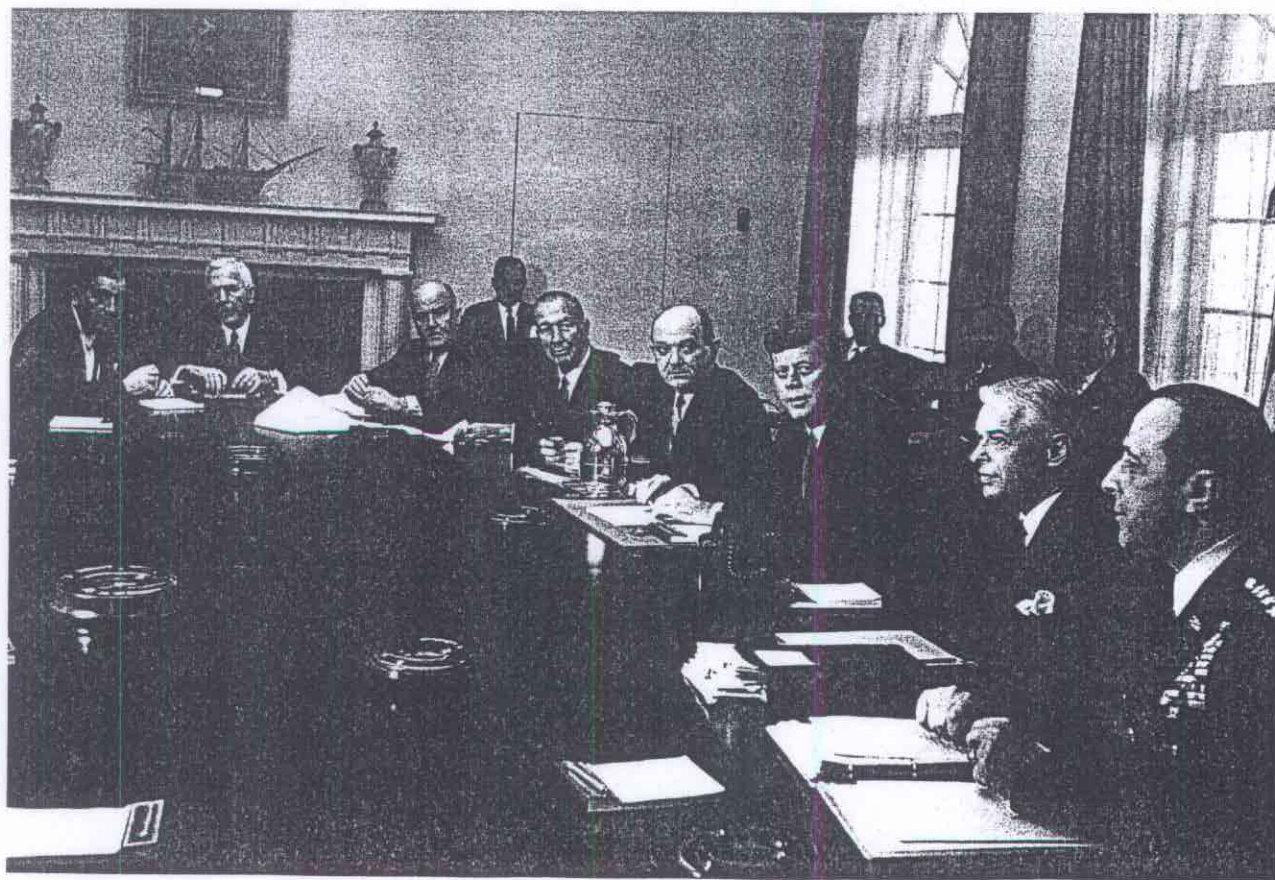
If Giancana ever had anything on the president, it did not save him from Robert Kennedy's crusade against organized crime. Had Giancana really made that mythical secret deal with Joseph P. Kennedy, he would certainly have used it on his own behalf when the feds were hot on his trail. Instead, his future was round-the-clock FBI surveillance, federal indictments and a year in prison.

A question remains about JFK and women. His sexual waywardness does not constitute John Kennedy's finest hour. But exaggeration is possible. Some today believe that there was an unending procession of bimbos through Kennedy's White House and that the Washington

press corps covered up for Kennedy because newspapermen liked him and because, under the civilized rules of the day, a politician's private life was considered his own business.

Vague rumors about JFK did waft about Washington from time to time, but, as one who worked in the White House, I never saw anything untoward. Kennedy was a hard-working fellow, concentrating intently on the problems at hand. At no point in my experience did his preoccupation with women (apart from Caroline crawling around the Oval Office) interfere with his conduct of the public business.

Lest this ignorance be attributed to the invincible innocence of a college professor, let me call another witness, that hard-bitten reporter, Ben Bradlee, then head of the *Newsweek* bureau in Washington, in later years the brilliant editor of *The Washington Post*. Bradlee was not only at the center of Washington news gathering; he was also Kennedy's closest friend in the press. "It is now accepted history," Bradlee writes in his



JFK HOLDS A WHITE HOUSE MEETING WITH THE U.S. DELEGATION TO THE DISARMAMENT CONFERENCE IN GENEVA, MARCH 1962. PHOTO FROM UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN



JOHN SHARES A LAUGH WITH BROTHERS ROBERT AND EDWARD AT THE FAMILY'S COMPOUND IN HYANNIS PORT, MASSACHUSETTS, IN 1962.
PHOTO FROM AP

1995 memoir, *A Good Life*, "that Kennedy jumped casually from bed to bed with a wide variety of women. It was not accepted history then...[I was] unaware of this proclivity during his lifetime."

Who can really know about anyone else's sex life? Unless one of the partners talks, or compromising letters turn up, or a third person is in the bedroom (an unlikely circumstance), no one can be certain what may have gone on between consenting adults—which does not prevent sensation-mongers writing with sublime certitude about the private lives of famous people.

Nor can outsiders ever pronounce on the inwardness of a marriage. My own impression, shared by others from the Kennedy White House, is that JFK, for all his adventures, always regarded Jacqueline with genuine affection and pride. Their marriage never seemed more solid than in the later months of 1963.

The argument is made that recklessness in private life leads to recklessness in public

affairs. But history shows no connection between private morality and public conduct. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, had wayward sexual habits but was all the same a tremendous moral force for his people and his nation. On the other hand, Pol Pot of Cambodia was apparently a faithful family man. All he did was murder hundreds of thousands of his countrymen.

There is much merit in a suggestion made during the 1884 presidential election. Grover Cleveland, a reform mayor of Buffalo and reform governor of New York, was exposed as the father of an illegitimate child, while his opponent, James G. Blaine, though complicit in a railroad scandal—the once-notorious Mulligan letters—was a devoted family man and devout churchgoer. "We are told," said one commentator, "that Mr. Blaine has been delinquent in office but blameless in private life, while Mr. Cleveland has been a model of official integrity, but culpable in his personal relations. We should therefore elect

Mr. Cleveland to the public office which he is so well qualified to fill, and remand Mr. Blaine to the private station which he is admirably fitted to adorn."

In Kennedy's case, the argument that private recklessness leads to public recklessness is invoked to explain the Bay of Pigs and the CIA assassination plots against Fidel Castro. But these were initiatives of the Eisenhower administration, not of the Kennedy administration, and no one has accused Ike of a reckless private life, at least since the Second World War.

The Bay of Pigs is one of the celebrated disasters of American history. One scholar called it "the perfect failure." In their last meeting, the day before Kennedy's inauguration, Eisenhower urged the president-elect to go full speed ahead against Cuba. Allen Dulles, then head of the CIA, told Kennedy that he was much more confident about success than he had been about the CIA overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala seven years earlier.

When Dulles detected inadequate enthusiasm on Kennedy's part, he emphasized what he called "the disposal problem." What would happen to the 1,200 Cubans whom the CIA had been training for months in Central America? They would wander about the hemisphere, saying that the great United States, after preparing an expedition against Castro, had lost its nerve under a new president. Kennedy well understood that Dulles was warning him against the political fallout in the United States as well should a former naval lieutenant j.g. dare to veto an operation organized and recommended by the supreme commander of the greatest amphibious landing in history.

Kennedy was trapped. He also may have felt, after his recent victory, that he was on a roll. If brave Cuban exiles wanted to free their land from a dictator, why not give them

the means to try their luck? Allen Dulles had assured him that the invasion would set off uprisings behind the line and defections from Castro's militia and that, if things went badly, the invaders could easily escape into the Escambray Mountains. Kennedy made it clear, however, that the Cuban brigade could not expect the Marines to intervene if the invasion faltered.

Much has been made of Kennedy's cancellation of a second air strike—too much; for a second strike would still have left 1,200 anti-Castro Cubans facing 200,000 of Castro's men. Richard Bissell, the CIA planner, later wrote that "even in the best scenario"—even if the second strike had not been canceled and Castro's planes had not been free to sink the supply ships—"the brigade might not necessarily have established and held the beachhead."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE PRESIDENT AND FIRST LADY WITH JOHN F. KENNEDY JR. AT THE WHITE HOUSE IN 1963 (ARCHIVE PHOTOS); JFK WITH HIS NAVAL AIDE, CMDR. TAZEWELL SHEPARD, AND JOHN-JOHN DURING A VISIT TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY ON VETERAN'S DAY IN 1963 (ARCHIVE PHOTOS); JFK AND JACKIE STROLL WITH JOHN-JOHN AND CAROLINE, NOVEMBER 14, 1963. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)



There were none of Dulles's uprisings or defections, and impassable swamps and jungles, it turned out, cut off the Escambray Mountains from the beachhead.

The Bay of Pigs was indeed a perfect failure. It was also an effective, if expensive, education. Having supposed that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff knew their business, the president now understood that they didn't. Thereafter he had no hesitation in rejecting their advice. "If it hadn't been for Cuba," Kennedy told me a month after the Bay of Pigs, "we might be about to intervene in Laos." Flourishing a sheaf of cables that the JCS chairman had sent from Laos, he added, "I might have taken this advice seriously."

"The first advice I'm going to give my successor," he told Ben Bradlee, "is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters were worth a damn."

Far from being reckless in foreign affairs, Kennedy was a cautious president, notable for his capacity to refuse escalation. When the Bay of Pigs invasion appeared to be failing, though under pressure from the military and the CIA to send in American forces, Kennedy declined to do so—as he later declined escalation in the Berlin crisis of 1961, the missile crisis of 1962 and the Vietnam crisis of 1963.

The missile crisis was the hour of maximum danger in the Cold War. Confronted by the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, the Joint Chiefs advocated a sneak air strike to be followed by an invasion. We know now that the Soviet forces on the island had tactical missiles equipped with nuclear warheads and the authority to use them in case of an American invasion. Had Kennedy taken the advice of the hawks, the result would probably have been nuclear war.

Instead he pursued—and achieved—a diplomatic solution.

Last year, two books came out unveiling the secrets of the Cuban missile crisis. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali's *One Hell of a Gamble* is the Soviet record, hitherto undisclosed, of the deliberations leading Nikita Khrushchev first to send and then to withdraw the nuclear missiles. *The Kennedy Tapes* by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow is the American record, hitherto undisclosed, of the debates in the White House following the discovery of the missiles. The nearly universal reaction has been praise for Kennedy's cool, sober and effective leadership in expelling the missiles without going to war.

There are those who claim that the Kennedys had an "obsession" with Castro and Cuba. They cite the assassination plots, though they were inherited from the



OUT-GOING PRESIDENT DWIGHT EISENHOWER'S CABINET IS PICTURED WITH INCOMING PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S, INSETS. PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE PHOTOS



JFK INHERITED VIETNAM AND THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION FROM EISENHOWER'S ADMINISTRATION. PHOTO BY ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Eisenhower administration, and they cite the Kennedy administration's own Operation Mongoose. But there is no direct evidence that either Eisenhower or Kennedy authorized or knew of the assassination plots. CIA officials testified that they had not even informed John McCone, the man Kennedy brought in to clean up the agency after the Bay of Pigs. If they informed Kennedy, they would have had to stipulate, "But you can't mention this to McCone."—a bureaucratic improbability.

What is far more likely is that the CIA, like intelligence agencies in other countries, believed that it knew the requirements of national security better than transient elected officials, like presidents, and invoked the excuse of "plausible deniability" to act as it deemed best without telling those to whom the agency was nominally accountable. As John Le Carre, who should know, has said, "Scrutiny of intelligence services is largely an illusory concept. If they're good, they fool the outsiders—and if they're bad they fool themselves."

As for Operation Mongoose, which

Robert Kennedy kept trying to spur on—not his finest hour—this was not an assassination project but a foolish, futile and costly intelligence-gathering and sabotage effort. As Richard Helms of the CIA testified before the Senate committee investigating assassination plots in 1975, "Mongoose was not intended to apply to assassination activity."

Those who are themselves obsessed with the theory of the Kennedys' alleged anti-Castro obsession must deal with the stubborn fact that, given by the Soviet missiles the best possible excuse for invading Cuba and smashing Castro forever, an excuse that would have been accepted around the world, it was Robert Kennedy who led the fight against military action and John Kennedy who made the decision against it. A year after the missile crisis, Kennedy was exploring through Ambassador William Attwood (United States) and Ambassador Carlos Lechuga (Cuba) and through the French journalist Jean Daniel the possibility of normalizing relations with Cuba. Some anti-Castro obsession!

And then came Vietnam. This was a problem Kennedy approached with well-ingrained doubts. As a young congressman in 1951, he had visited Indochina, and watched a crack French army fail to subdue Vietnamese nationalists. He left with the conviction that the dispatch of non-Asian troops to decide the future of Vietnam would only rouse nationalist emotions against the intruder and would, as he said in a radio address on his return to the United States, mean "foredoomed failure."

By the time, a decade later, that Kennedy came to the White House, a commitment to save South Vietnam from communism had crystallized in the Eisenhower years. Kennedy thought it an overcommitment. But the commitment having been made, it could not be abandoned except at a price; and he was prepared to give the government in Saigon a run for its money. He offered Saigon economic assistance and increased the number of American military advisers attached to the South Vietnamese army (though at his



VICE PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, PRESIDENTIAL AIDE ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR., CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS ADM. ARLEIGH BURKE AND PRESIDENT AND MRS. KENNEDY WATCH TELEVISION COVERAGE OF ASTRONAUT ALAN SHEPARD'S SPACE FLIGHT IN 1961. PHOTO FROM AP

death there were far fewer American troops in Vietnam than Soviet troops in Cuba during the missile crisis or American troops in the Dominican Republic in 1965).

But he rejected every proposal to send American combat units to Vietnam and, in effect, Americanize the war. If the United States converted the Vietnam fighting into an American war, he believed, we would lose—as the French had lost a decade before. "The last thing he wanted," Gen. Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs and later Lyndon Johnson's ambassador to Vietnam, later said, "was to put in ground forces."

Kennedy was reinforced in this view by a talk with Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who told him it would be foolish to fight in Southeast Asia; the future of Vietnam should be decided at the diplomatic table. Thereafter, when the Pentagon called for the commitment of American ground forces, Kennedy would say, "Well, now, you gentlemen, you go back and convince General MacArthur, then I'll be convinced." In 1962, he directed the Pentagon to draw up plans for the withdrawal

of the American military advisers in 1965. The plan was approved in May 1963, with the first 1,000 men to return at the end of the year.

No one knows what a dead president might do about problems that become acute after his death. It is hard enough to know what living presidents will do about anything. But it is difficult to suppose that Kennedy would ever have reversed himself and sent ground forces into Vietnam. Both Robert McNamara, his secretary of defense, and McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser, have latterly said that in their judgment Kennedy would never have Americanized the war—though, ironically, they advised Johnson to do exactly that, and he, with misgivings, followed that advice, thinking that that was what Kennedy would have done.

Kennedy believed in military strength. But he valued military strength as a means not to war but to peace. "Let us never negotiate out of fear," he had said in his inaugural address. "But let us never fear to negotiate."

He had a realistic sense of the limitations of American power. "We must face the fact," he said in 1962, "that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient—that we are only six percent of the world's population—that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent of mankind—that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity—and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem."

Kennedy believed that in the end America's influence in the world depended less on American arms than on American ideals. Undertakings such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress were closest to his heart. The Peace Corps, still going strong 35 years later, sent young Americans to the far corners of the earth to work with local people in improving education, public health and agricultural productivity. The Alliance for Progress was designed to promote economic growth and democratic institutions in Latin America.

Most important of all was the effort to stop the nuclear arms race. During the tense days of the missile crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev had looked down the nuclear abyss together. Both came away consumed with a passion to rescue the planet from the overhanging horror of nuclear holocaust.

Determined to banish the clichés and rigidities of the Cold War, Kennedy, in a notable speech at American University in June 1963, called for a change in American, as well as Soviet, attitudes. "No government or social system," he said, "is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue....We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion

on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons."

The first step in slowing up the arms race, a test ban treaty with the Soviet Union, was consummated in September 1963. Contrasting the two American presidents he had known, Khrushchev later wrote in his memoirs, "The comparison would not be in favor of Eisenhower....It quickly became clear [Kennedy] understood better than Eisenhower that an improvement in relations was the only rational course."

In the fall of 1963, Kennedy told Robert that his greatest disappointment was that he had not accomplished more on nuclear disarmament. The second disappointment, he said, was that he had had to spend

so much time on foreign policy; "each day was a new crisis." In his second term, he planned to concentrate on domestic affairs, especially on combating poverty, spreading economic opportunity and promoting racial justice.

Racism is historically the great failure of the American experiment, the glaring contradiction of American ideals and the still crippling disease of American society. Kennedy was an OK civil rights man when elected president. But it was rather an abstract problem for him, as it was then for most white Americans: someone should do something about it some time, but not just now.

Black Americans were not prepared to wait any longer. They had already begun to



KENNEDY PUFFS ON A CIGAR AT THE OPENING DAY GAME BETWEEN THE WASHINGTON SENATORS AND THE DETROIT TIGERS IN 1962.
PHOTO FROM AP

demand constitutional rights with righteous determination and unflinching courage. Kennedy for a while underestimated the moral urgency behind the crusade for racial justice. But he was educated by bitter events. Angry resistance by Southern officials to federal court orders at the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama and growling police dogs unleashed in Southern cities against peaceful demonstrators shocked the country and at last made congressional action feasible. In June 1963, Kennedy went on national television. His eloquent words bear repetition—and still carry meaning—today.

In that speech, 35 years ago, Kennedy called on every American to examine his conscience. "If an American, because his skin is dark... cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want," he asked, "then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?"

"We are confronted," he continued, "primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.... It is a time to act in the Congress, in our states and local legislative bodies and, above all, in all of our daily lives." And he set forth a program for the integration of black Americans into the national community.

Critics call Kennedy dilatory and opportunistic on civil rights and wonder at his abiding popularity among black Americans. But, as Prof. Thomas Brown comments, "Though one may legitimately ask whether Kennedy did enough to justify such wide support among blacks, one somehow suspects that they were better judges" than the critics.

Actually, despite each day's new international crisis (and despite the revisionist critique), Kennedy compiled a pretty good record in domestic policy, as Prof. Irving Bernstein of UCLA shows in his book, *Promises Kept: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier* (1991). During the Kennedy years, overall economic growth averaged 5.6 percent, unemployment fell from 7 to 5.7 percent and inflation was held at 1.2 percent. In his thousand days, JFK laid the groundwork for federal aid to education and the arts, Medicare, increases in the minimum wage, the redevelopment of Appalachia and other rural areas, the war on poverty and the

Keynesian tax cut of 1964—indeed, for most of President Johnson's Great Society.

Johnson was better than Kennedy in cajoling and bullying Congress. And the 1964 election, by giving LBJ an extra 37 Democrats in the House, nearly all liberals from the north, made him the only Democratic president since FDR's first term to have a working Democratic majority in both houses. It was this political arithmetic more than Johnson's parliamentary wizardry that made possible the impressive array of social programs enacted in 1964 and 1965.

Kennedy made his share of mistakes. In addition to the excesses of private life and the fatuity of the Bay of Pigs and Operation Mongoose, there was his 1961 decision, before the "missile gap" was disproved, to call for a build-up of the American nuclear missile force. This ended any hope of freezing the rival forces at lower levels, and set off the nuclear arms race. There was the reappointment of J. Edgar Hoover and Allen Dulles. There was the crazy 1961 call for fallout shelters to protect against nuclear attack. There was the 1962 enthusiasm for counterinsurgency in the Third World. There was the deepening of the inherited U.S. commitment to Vietnam. And there was throughout an excessive New Frontier faith in activism, a conviction that, if there was a problem, there must be a solution, and let's do it tomorrow. But Kennedy never lost the capacity to learn from his mistakes. Each year he became a better president.

Perhaps most important of all was the impact Kennedy had on a new generation of Americans. He liked to quote the Scottish author John Buchan: "Politics is still the greatest and most honorable adventure." At Kennedy's behest, bright, idealistic and capable young men and women, asking not what their country could do for them but what they could do for their country, flocked to Washington. They brought new ideas, hopes, vision, generosity and vitality to the national life. There had been nothing like it since the early days of FDR's New Deal.

JFK touched and remolded lives and gave young people the faith that individuals can make a difference to history. Inspired by his words, they dedicated themselves thereafter to public service, whether in government, in civil rights and human rights movements, in nonprofit sectors, in

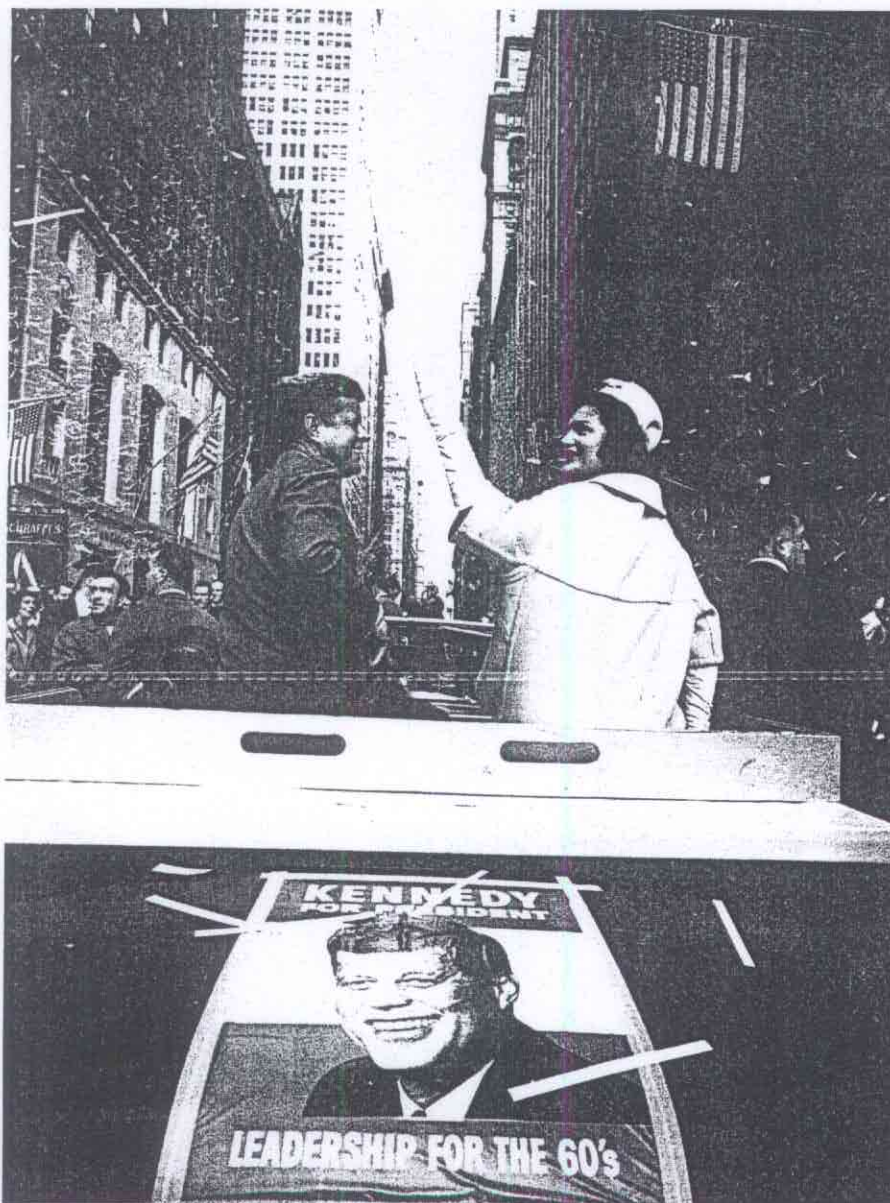
community organization, in their own hearts and souls. His irreverence toward conventional ideas and institutions provoked a discharge of critical energy throughout American society. He gave the country back to its own best self and taught the world that the process of rediscovering America was not over.

One is bound to speculate how America and the world would have been different if Kennedy had lived. For individuals do indeed make a difference to history. In December 1931, a British politician crossing Fifth Avenue in New York City was struck by an automobile and nearly killed. In February 1933, an American politician sitting in an open car in Miami was fired upon by an assassin; the mayor of Chicago, sitting beside him, was killed. Would the history of the twentieth century have been the same if the New York automobile had killed Winston Churchill and the Miami assassin had killed Franklin Roosevelt?

Had John F. Kennedy lived, his New Frontier program would have been enacted, he would have pressed the attack on poverty and racism in America, would have pursued détente in Europe, would most probably have withdrawn from Vietnam, and would have urged on the global crusade against nuclear proliferation. The republic would have been spared much of the trauma, disorder and violence that disfigured the raging 1960s.



JFK AND JACKIE SAIL OFF CAPE COD IN 1953.
HY PESKIN, LIFE MAGAZINE © TIME INC.



THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE AND HIS WIFE WAVE TO A JUBILANT CROWD IN NEW YORK CITY'S "CANYON OF HEROES" DURING A TICKER-TAPE PARADE IN OCTOBER 1960. PHOTO FROM UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN

And there remain memories of the private man. He was not, as some claim, a bearer of grudges—the “don’t get mad, get even” idea. He made Lyndon Johnson his vice president after Johnson had said unforgivable things about his father. He took most of the Stevenson-for-President crowd—George Ball, Willard Wirtz, Thomas K. Finletter, William Blair, Newton Minow, J. Edward Day, William Attwood, Clayton Fritchey—into his administration though the Stevenson campaign had seemed for

a moment to imperil his nomination.

Nor was he, as claimed, a spoiled rich man who used and discarded people and treated his associates as if they were indentured servants. He was one of the most unfailingly courteous and considerate men I have ever known. I did my share of creating trouble for his administration; and a couple of times, after one scrape or another made headlines, I told him that maybe the time had come for me to resign. He would laugh and dismiss the idea: “Better that you’re the target than me.”

He was easy, accessible, witty, candid, enjoying the clash of ideas and the ripples of gossip, never more relaxed than when sitting in his rocking chair and puffing away on a fine Havana cigar. He was, in his self-description, an “idealist without illusions.” He was the best of my generation. It is good for the country that he remains so vivid a presence in our minds and hearts. ♦

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